

Living Near Mbeubeuss – An Overview

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Current Conditions

Mbeubeuss is not the name of a tourist resort, but rather of a landfill. Far from conjuring up a vacation, the Mbeubeuss landfill is situated in the Dakar region, specifically, in the district of Malika.

Open since 1968, the landfill is situated on a dried-up lake bed in Niayes, Senegal's principal market garden area. Mbeubeuss receives all the household and solid industrial waste produced in the Dakar region, which amounts to 460,000 tons a year. We might recall that the capital region, the country's most urbanized area, is home to about 2.5 million inhabitants.

But as a result of the 1996 decentralization reform, the district of Malika has become a *commune d'arrondissement* of the department of Pikine and has 7,038 inhabitants. The expansion of the landfill, which covers over 175 hectares, therefore poses a problem for the development of Malika.

At the landfill, organic waste is not separated from inert material; the refuse is simply buried after being dumped by trucks that are weighed at the weighbridge. The site, which is not fenced in, is frequented by salvagers. And it is not uncommon to encounter stray animals and rodents, which are carriers of disease.

Managing the leachates, that is, the residual fluids from the leaching of water through the refuse, is one of the main problems, as these fluids contain various pollutants that can contaminate surface and ground water. The leachates, and the gases produced by the decomposition of the waste, are harmful to human health. The foul odours released by the landfill invade the nearby dwellings, especially in hot weather, to say nothing of the flies that proliferate during the rainy season.

Besides the loss of productive lands, the nearby communities must deal with increased road traffic and noise. The people who live adjacent to Mbeubeuss, particularly in the city of Diamalaye, say their movements are hindered by the constant passing of trucks transporting refuse or sand – the only authorized extraction site being the beach near the dump.

A Human Health Risk

The presence of a dump can significantly affect human health. Epidemiological studies done in industrialized nations have revealed the various symptoms experienced by many people who live close to dumps: fatigue, headaches, drowsiness, throat irritation, breathing difficulties and skin conditions. These studies also found that the risk of birth defects in newborns and of possible delayed foetal development is high. They show that people who live close to a dump are at risk for becoming sterile, for developing various cancers (of the liver, kidneys, lungs, stomach), and for developing psychiatric disorders.

These effects are all the more troubling as hundreds of people, including children, live right at Mbeubeuss itself, notably in Baol and Gouye Gui. In these "villages", those who earn their living as salvagers also use waste materials to build their dwellings and as backfill for the

roads. Because drainage is poor, rainwater accumulates in these environments, creating a breeding ground for the larva of mosquitoes, which carry malaria.

Livestock are vulnerable as well. Thus, the women who collect food waste noticed that some of the pigs they fed it to died. In 2005, studies done very close to Mbeubeuss by Pesticide Action Network (PAN) Africa, an information and action network for pesticide control, showed that dioxins, toxic chemicals, were contaminating chicken eggs. The herds of cattle and sheep that wander the landfill have been decimated, victims of the plastic bags they consumed.

Finding Solutions

There is a team of researchers on site. A three-year project, supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), will improve the living conditions of the people who live near the Mbeubeuss landfill. Working with the communities of Malika, the team will study various solutions for reducing the health effects of this landfill, improving the quality of the environment and promoting job creation. The project results, to be widely disseminated, will help decision-makers, and others, develop local and national waste management and reclamation policies. Other African countries could turn to good account this research and the lasting solutions that will benefit the people of Senegal.

The research team, known as the Dakar Focus City Team,¹ is made up of experts from the African Institute for Urban Management (AIUM), the Basel Convention Regional Centre for Francophone Africa, the Sustainable Cities Initiative of Industry Canada, the Institut fondamental d'Afrique noire (IFAN), an important repository of library resources, Senegal's Ministry of Environment and Nature Protection, ENDA, a non-governmental organization, and ERECO, a solid waste management company.

¹ The Focus Cities Research Initiative (FCRI) is a component of the Urban Poverty and Environment (UPE) Program of IDRC. The FCRI relies on active community participation in the research projects to alleviate the pressures on the cities' environment and, by extension, on the poor.